

The issue of South Talpatty

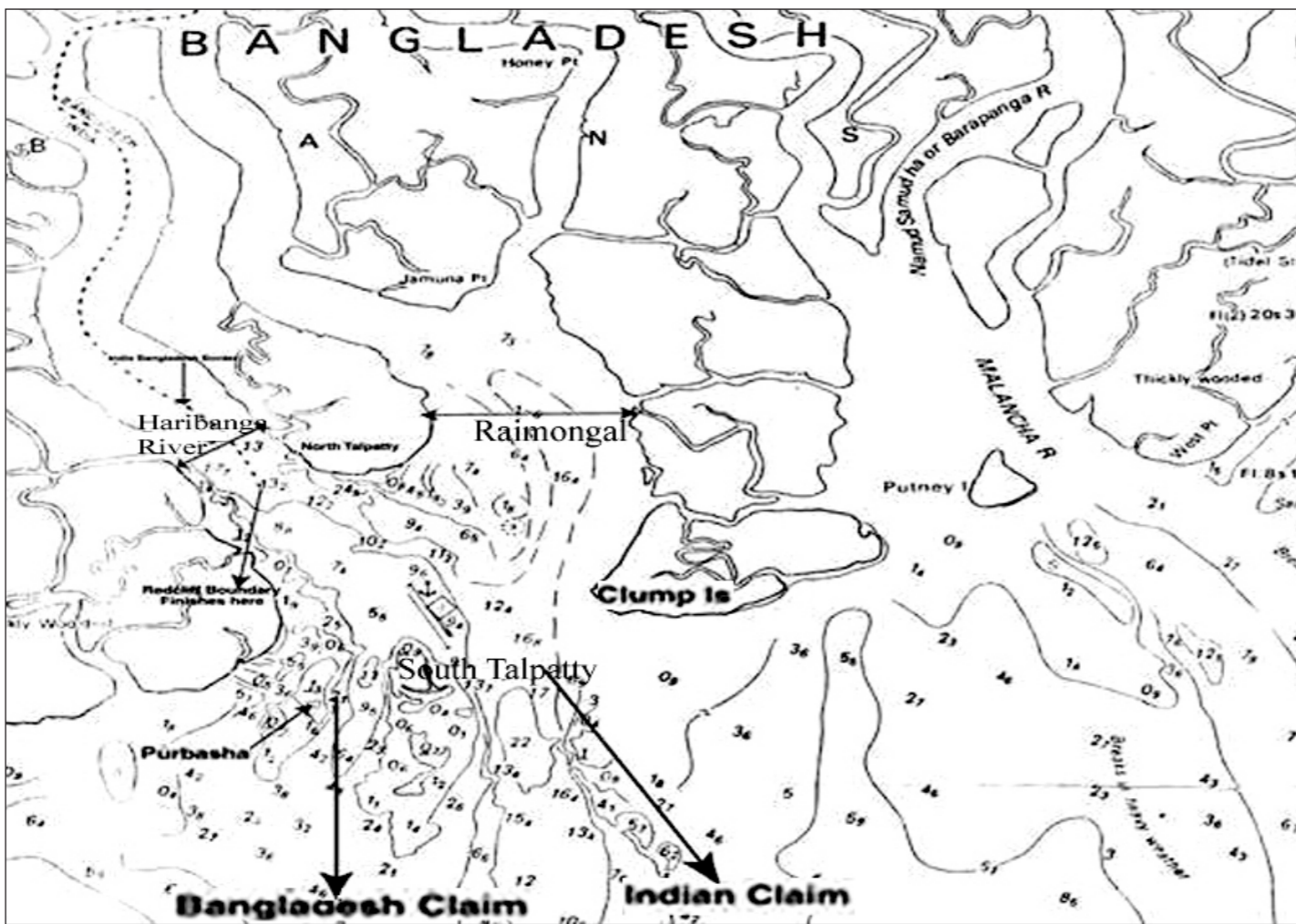
CMDRE KHURSHED ALAM ndc, psc (ret'd)

THE island of South Talpatty as we call it or New Moore Island (as India calls it), was first shown in the navigation chart on information provided by India sometime in 1971.

In the interest of good neighbourly relations, Bangladesh proposed a joint survey to dispel any misgivings about the rightful ownership of this island. The Indian Prime Minister agreed to such a joint survey as proposed by Bangladesh during his visit to Dhaka in April 1979.

The ship went to South Talpatty Island and landed some of those uniformed personnel, some huts and tents, one aerial mast and one pole bearing Indian flag were also seen erected on the island.

Apparently with a view to justifying its illegal action, government of India accused Bangladesh navy of provocative activities and another Petya class Indian frigate, "INS Andaman", was sent to join "INS



Sandhayak". This was tantamount to further escalation of the provocative situation though Indian Ministry of External Affairs reiterated the intention of the government of India to exchange further data and to hold further discussion based on the understanding reached between the two foreign ministers for the peaceful resolution on this problem.

The dispute over this island has more to do with the extent of the maritime zone to be potentially acquired in the oil rich delta of the Bay of Bengal than the island itself.

areas in the Continental Shelf. For Bangladesh the sovereignty over the island, will enable it to draw the maritime boundary line west of the South Talpatty in the north south natural prolongation of our land mass, its adjacent historic fishing areas, its territorial sea and ensure safe entry to the major port of Mongla with effective control over the waters of the SWATCH OF NO GROUND (the deepest seabed near the coast of Bangladesh).

India totally disregarded the existence of another smaller Low

Tide Elevation (Purbasha), which the writer feels may be discussed for sovereignty rights between the two neighbours but there is no question of disputing the sovereignty rights of Bangladesh over the South Talpatty as this has formed in the estuary of Raimongal river, being the internal river of Bangladesh.

Problems of conflicting claims often do not result from lack of understanding of international law but from the politics surrounding the claims. International law deals with delimiting respective territorial boundaries, regulating the transfer to territory from one state to another as well as determining the actual

status of a particular territory. The primary question will remain whether India has the right mindset to solve this problem. India claims to be on high moral ground as it has solved all its maritime boundary problems with all its neighbours except Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The author is ex chairman Mongla Port Authority.

Is Sri Lanka sliding into another civil war?

BILLY I AHMED

THE carefully planned suicide bombing at army headquarters in central Colombo on 25 April, bears a new format that points to Sri Lanka heading for a civil war.

The attack involved a female suicide bomber, dressed as a pregnant woman, who pretended to be visiting the army hospital near the heavily guarded, high-security zone. She waited for the arrival of the army chief, Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka, and detonated her explosives, killing eight people on the spot and wounding 27 others, mainly military personnel.

LTTE has officially refuted responsibility, but there can be little doubt the LTTE organised and led the attack. Suicide bombings have been the LTTE's symbol. In all likelihood, Lt. Gen. Fonseka was targeted because of his public agitation for tougher measures against the LTTE.

Another clash took place at nearby Muttur. There is no doubt the attacks had been planned well in advance. The LTTE presence close to key strategic army and navy bases in Trincomalee had long been the subject of criticism in the Colombo press from military sources.

According to LTTE spokespersons, the air raid in the Sampoor area levelled houses and killed at least 12 people, including civilians. Estimates of the number of refugees fleeing from Muttur and Sampoor vary between 15,000 and 40,000.

Both the government and the LTTE claim to be for "peace" and neither side has officially abrogated the ceasefire. But all the signs are pointing toward a rapid slide back to all-out civil war that will have devastating effects for working people on the island.

Both sides are threatening war. S. Pulidevan LTTE representative told the media: "They are firing with artillery and cannons. It is like a war in Trincomalee. If the attacks continue, the LTTE will be forced to take military defensive action."

Government defence spokesperson, was no less choleric declaring: "There's no duration or limits on defence matters. If the LTTE continues its attacks, there will be coordinated retaliation or defence. This will

continue as long as the LTTE targets the security forces." In his comments, Media Minister Anura Priyadarasahna Yapa denied that the ceasefire was in a shambles after the first open breaches by the Sri Lankan military, saying only "it's a bit of a lull".

Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) head Major General Ulf Henricsson warned that if the air strikes continued, peace talks would be difficult. The worst-case scenario was a return to war, he said. "I think the parties are not prepared for that. And if they were, it would be devastating for the people of Sri Lanka and for their own military capabilities," he added.

However, the so-called peace process sponsored by the major foreign powers has slowly stopped. Negotiations were held in Geneva in February for the first time in nearly three years, but nearly broke down when President Rajapakse government called for major revisions to the current ceasefire.

A second round of talks, due to take place on April 19-21, was rescheduled for April 24-25 then postponed altogether.

Since the Geneva talks in February, President Rajapakse has come under growing pressure from his allies to take a more aggressive stance toward the LTTE. His minority government is dependent on the JVP and JHU for parliamentary support.

The JVP branded the suicide bombing as a declaration of war and urged the government to abrogate the ceasefire altogether. JVP general secretary Tilvan Silva yesterday declared: "The CFA (ceasefire agreement) is dead. Its conditions and rulings no longer apply and the government need not bother any more about it."

The opposition United National Party (UNP), which on behalf of big business has pushed for a negotiated end to the war is also coming under pressure to take a tougher stance. After meeting with Rajapakse, UNP deputy general secretary Tissa Attanayake condemned the suicide bombing and warned: "If the peace process is to be fruitful, the LTTE should take immediate action to control their violent actions."

An editorial in the right-wing Island wrote: "Yesterday's attack has blasted hopes of Geneva talks, which the LTTE is all out to scuttle. One may wonder whether the truce is holding any longer with the LTTE

committing such acts of terror as are suggestive of war already begun. It is incumbent upon the government to ready itself for any eventuality, while trekking the path of peace cautiously avoiding mines."

The Daily Mirror published an editorial after the bombing calling for unity against "fierce terrorists who have no respect for life or liberty". The newspaper called for President Rajapakse to resist calls for retaliation against the LTTE, declaring: "The government, however, is obliged to act responsibly, without letting the country slide into the precipice of a disastrous war, as long as the doors to talks remain open."

The US, the EU, Japan and India have all condemned the suicide bombing and called on both sides to adhere to the ceasefire and return to negotiations. In New Delhi, the Indian government called its Crisis Management Group on Wednesday to assess the situation and sent more warships to the Palk Straits between India and Sri Lanka.

In Washington, however, there was a shift in emphasis. US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher stated: "It is regrettable that the Tamil Tigers have decided to restart the war instead of restarting the peace process. We are in touch with governments around the world to bring to bear what ever pressure we can on the Tamil Tigers to abandon this course of action and to look for ways that we can support the government in coping with the threat."

The heightening conflict in the North and East coincides with strikes and protests by workers, farmers and the poor against the impact of the government's IMF-dictated austerity program and market reforms.

As for the LTTE, it faces growing hostility from the Tamil minority over its antidemocratic methods and arbitrary imposition of taxes. Four years after signing of the ceasefire, hundreds of thousands of people are still living in refugee camps. Most Tamils have seen no significant improvement in their living standards. With no perspective for a progressive resolution to the conflict, the LTTE leadership, like its Sinhala counterparts in Colombo, may well consider war as the only means of resolving its political crisis.

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Will the United States strike Iran?

RUKSANA KIBRIA

DESPITE vigorous dismissal of possible air strikes against Iran as "wild speculation," the Bush administration is reportedly exploring military options to deal with it which, as a part of "an axis of evil" cannot be allowed to possess nuclear capacity in any form.

Iran's quest for either dominance of the Gulf region or acquiring nuclear capacity is nothing new, since these were sought even during the late Shah's reign. The fact that these goals are pursued by an Islamic revolutionary government in Iran is what is regarded to be so galling under the circumstances, particularly since its president has also openly talked about "wiping Israel off the map."

The neo-cons in the Bush administration are privately in favour of a military solution, which is not surprising given the absolute military superiority that the United States enjoys at present. But would this option yield the desired outcome, namely, wiping out Iran's nuclear sites, eliminating its capacity for leadership in the Gulf region, bringing about a regime change in Tehran a la Baghdad and moulding the entire Middle East according to the political and strategic vision of the United States? That remains to be seen.

(who are said to be funded by the same sources as was the anti-Saddam Iraqi National Congress). The question at this point is not whether the United States can undertake a military campaign against Iran (which it definitely can), but whether it will do so to achieve its objectives. The fact is, there are limitations as to what can be achieved through military means, refusal to address which could do the United States more harm than good in the long run.

There is however, a precedent for the use of force for destroying a regional nuclear site: the Israeli bombing of Iraqi nuclear reactors at Osiraq in June 1981, presumably with US approval. But then Iran is not Iraq. There are factors which render Iran a much different case - it is territorially not only four times larger, and thrice as populous as Iraq, but its terrain is also much more rugged and inaccessible.

The refusal of the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad to comply with the UN deadline for suspending uranium enrichment has escalated the chances of collision between the United States and Iran. Discussions are currently underway in the UN Security Council to approve a resolution on Iran that may invoke Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, thus paving the way for military action.

undertaking military operations against Iran either unilaterally, or with the cooperation of what is called "the coalition of the willing," (which may include European countries like Britain, France and Germany). While such an undertaking may be technically feasible, its apparent short-term "success" would be out-weighted by immediate and long-term political and economic damage it would cause, among which, adverse reaction among the regional and other Muslim countries, and the consequent anti-American backlash it would generate.

There would also be an economic dimension to any possible military action. Iran contains roughly 10% and 15% of global proven oil and gas reserves respectively, and is the third largest oil exporting country in the world, producing 4.5 million barrels of oil per day (bpd), and having a spare capacity to produce another 2 million bpd. The US initiation of a military conflict would inevitably lead to an acute disruption of oil supply from the entire Gulf region, triggering a price hike that would be calamitous for not only the US economy but for the rest of the world as well.

The goal of the United States is to replace the present Iranian regime with one friendly toward it (just like it did in 1953), thereby facilitating an increase in oil production, and allowing US oil companies to operate in Iran, something which they have been denied for more than a quarter of a century to the detriment of US

interests. Besides, its geo-strategic location makes it a virtual gatekeeper of the oil-rich Caspian Basin region, and it is through Iran that the shortest and the most convenient route for transporting Caucasus and Caspian Basin oil could be charted. In brief, the real issue is the control of the Middle East and its oil, the nuclear issue being only a "vast red herring."

Iran may be petroleum-rich, but the fact is, this is a finite resource which is expected to be depleted in 30-40 years, which renders its quest for an alternative source of energy natural as well as rational. As is pointed out by its government, it is for generating energy for civilian use, which is amply attested by the fact that its uranium enrichment level is only 3.5%, whereas weapons grade enrichment would have to be about 80-90%, that would take at least a decade.

Such unfounded claims notwithstanding, Iran's nuclear programme does not warrant being labelled as a threat to international peace and security. It is however, only by making such a case that pre-emptive US military actions against Iran can be justified. Such an unfortunate eventuality would put an end to a treaty-based nonproliferation regime and usher in an era of militarily enforced counter-proliferation strategy.

If the United States could have a dialogue with North Korea (which has admitted possessing an active WMD programme), to defuse the nuclear crisis in Northeast Asia, there is no reason why a similar approach could not be adopted for dealing with Iran, which has consistently stated that its nuclear programme is peaceful, and has expressed its willingness for negotiation, as is indicated by the letter just sent to the US president by his Iranian counterpart (for the first time in 27 years), offering "new solutions for getting out of international problems and the current fragile situation of the world".

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Infographic titled 'Sri Lanka attack' showing a map of Sri Lanka with Jaffna and Trincomalee marked. It includes a legend for 'Tamil-held areas' and 'Government-controlled areas', a scale bar for 80 km, and a text box stating 'Fighting between the main Tamil tiger rebels and a breakaway faction, reported Monday'. The AFP logo and number 080506 are at the bottom.